

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

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AMEMBASSY PARIS
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E.O. 11652:N/A
TAGS: PINT, PEPR, UK, EEC
SUBJECT: DIRECT ELECTIONS: GOVERNMENT TIMETABLE PLAN-
TRIGGERS BACKBENCH REACTION

REF: LONDON 20168 (77)

SUMMARY - THE GOVERNMENT, AS EXPECTED, ANNOUNCED ITS
INTENTION TO INTRODUCE A TIMETABLE MOTION ON THE EC
DIRECT ELECTION BILL JANUARY 26 IN ORDER TO PRECLUDE
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A POSSIBLE FILIBUSTER. THE ANNOUNCEMENT PROVOKED
VIGOROUS CRIES OF OUTRAGE FROM ANTI-EC LABOR BACK-
BENCHERS, WHO THREATENED TO RETALIATE BY WITHHOLDING
THEIR SUPPORT FROM OTHER GOVERNMENT LEGISLATION. AT
THIS POINT IT SEEMS LIKELY THAT THE LABOR ANTI-
MARKETEERS WILL CARRY OUT THIS THREAT, BUT THEIR
OPPOSITION TO THE TIMETABLE MOTION MEANS THAT ITS

PASSAGE WILL PROBABLY BE DEPENDENT ON CONSERVATIVE SUPPORT. THE TORIES, WE UNDERSTAND, HAVE DECIDED TO ALLOW A FREE VOTE ON THE QUESTION, AND WE ANTICIPATE THAT IT WILL BE APPROVED. END SUMMARY

1. LEADER OF COMMONS, MICHAEL FOOT, JANUARY 19, ANNOUNCED THAT THE GOVERNMENT WILL INTRODUCE A TIMETABLE MOTION ON THE EC DIRECT ELECTIONS BILL JANUARY 26. WHILE IT HAD BEEN WIDELY ANTICIPATED THAT PASSAGE OF THE DIRECT ELECTIONS BILL WOULD BE CONTINGENT ON APPROVAL OF A TIMETABLE (REFTEL), FOOT'S ANNOUNCEMENT PROVOKED AN IMMEDIATE AND INTEMPERATE REACTION FROM ANTI-EC LABORITES. ERIC HEFFER -- WHO IN 1975 RESIGNED FROM THE GOVERNMENT OVER THE EC ISSUE -- LED THE DISSIDENTS, ARGUING THAT THE GOVERNMENT WAS IGNORING PARTY CONFERENCE RESOLUTIONS AND THREATENING TO WITHHOLD HIS SUPPORT FROM OTHER GOVERNMENT LEGISLATION, SHOULD IT GO AHEAD WITH THE TIMETABLE MOTION. HEFFER'S THREATS WERE ECHOED BY OTHER LABOR BACKBENCHERS, WHOSE PROTESTS AMUSED THE CONSERVATIVE OPPOSITION.

2. OUR INITIAL ASSESSMENT IS THAT THE LABOR ANTI-MARKETEERS, IN THE FINAL ANALYSIS, WILL NOT LAUNCH A MAJOR EFFORT TO DEFEAT OTHER GOVERNMENT LEGISLATION, THOUGH THEY MAY SEEK OPPORTUNITIES TO INFLICT EMBARRASSING, BUT SUBSTANTIVELY INSIGNIFICANT DEFEATS ON LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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THE GOVERNMENT OVER THE NEXT FEW WEEKS. THIS JUDGEMENT IS GENERALLY CONSISTENT WITH THAT OF THE GOVERNMENT WHIPS AND OUR SOURCES IN THE ANTI-EC CAMP. IN ANY EVENT, THE OUTLOOK WILL BE CLEARER FOLLOWING THE PARLIAMENTARY LABOR PARTY'S JANUARY 24 MEETING ON THE TIMETABLE PROPOSAL.

3. PASSAGE OF THE TIMETABLE, AS WE INDICATED IN REFTEL, WILL PROBABLY DEPEND ON HOW THE CONSERVATIVES VOTE. WE UNDERSTAND THAT THEIR LEADERSHIP HAS DECIDED TO ALLOW A FREE VOTE ON THE ISSUE. SINCE WE DO NOT BELIEVE THE TORIES WISH TO DELAY THE DIRECT ELECTIONS BILL UNTIL THE NEXT SESSION OF PARLIAMENT, WE EXPECT THAT A LARGE MAJORITY OF THEIR MPS WILL VOTE FOR THE TIMETABLE, ASSURING ITS PASSAGE. AS A RESULT, THE DIRECT ELECTIONS BILL SHOULD RECEIVE ITS FINAL APPROVAL DURING THE CURRENT SESSION.

BREWSTER

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